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Nursing Internships/Clinicals Impacted by COVID-19

Ashley Hagar, Staff Reporter

Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, schools across the nation found themselves moving to full remote learning. New campus life meant that students were no longer allowed to go to sporting events, have limited in-person social life, or even have the opportunity to go back onto campus. During the pandemic, Seattle University created a plan which allows students to return to campus with a hybrid course system and safety protocols put in place to ensure social distancing.

When COVID-19 first hit during the Spring quarter, nursing students were forced to adapt to online classes, labs, and clinicals. Starting the new school year, one of the nursing department's main goals was to allow their students to participate in in-person clinicals and internships. In order to stay on-track, second year nursing students are required to attend specific clinicals during their spring quarter. For third year students, the level is raised and they must complete year-long health internships, fall and winter clinicals, and various courses. In their final year at Seattle U, nursing students finish their clinical hours and have their senior practicum in the spring.

This past academic year was the inaugural year of the Population Health Internship (PHI), which is the yearlong required internship for third year students. Over the course of the school year, students work on a community project and either create or participate in an intervention activity for the agency they are interning at. The internship focuses on health promotion and disease prevention for entire communities rather than just individuals or families. When COVID-19 hit last spring, nursing students were told to move this work online and complete their internship remotely.

When planning for this year, PHI Coordinator, Jennifer Fricas ensured the internship agencies were prepared with a plan in case the pandemic were to force students to move fully remote again. Fricas elaborated on the decision making process saying,

"Over the summer I kept in contact with the College of Nursing leadership to understand the implications of the pandemic on the PHI. As the University and the College of Nursing issued guidelines for the engagement of our students at our various community sites, it became clear that students could work with their internship agencies provided three circumstances were checked."

These three circumstances include the agencies must be open and accepting students, able to provide students with all required personal protective equipment (PPE) and ensure each student would have the ability to fully commit to attending in person clinicals.

Third year nursing student, Matthew Wald, is currently enrolled in both the PHI and clinical Wald commented on the decision making process of having these courses be in person saying, "I'm very thankful for the College of Nursing staff and faculty. They did a really good job with the process," and added that they were sent polls regarding student preferences. Wald states that throughout the summer, nursing students were obtaining "slow trickles of information" and never kept in the dark when it came to the final decision.



Wald emphasized the importance of having in-person classes saying he would have considered a gap year or even dropping out if they had been remote.

"It is why the College of Nursing is so successful here, because we do so much work in our community and clinicals. It was definitely the right call," Wald said.

After last spring when the clinicals moved to online, some nursing students feared they may be remote again this fall. However, the College of Nursing wanted to give their students the best opportunity by providing in-person clinicals with proper safety guidelines in place.

As a fourth year, Khanh Nguyen is working as a nurse technician and participating in clinicals that are placed in different locations around the Seattle area.

"I feel way more protected at the hospital than I would walking outside in Seattle or even at campus because I know exactly who has COVID," Nguyen said.

She went on to explain that nursing students do not come in direct contact with COVID patients because of floor separations that allow for those who are infected to remain in isolation. Nguyen also added that having in-person clinicals is crucial to learning how to be a nurse as it gives the students the necessary hands on experience.

The nursing students at SU are able to have their in person clinicals as they maintain proper social distancing guidelines and wear the necessary PPE when in the hospital setting. They value the ability to learn by doing and have the experience with little changes to the curriculum amidst a pandemic. As the year moves on, the nursing department will continue to monitor the pandemic and adjust accordingly.